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II

Liberation

THE liberation of Austria was carried out from three directions very rapidly, the whole process being completed within a few weeks. On the 29th of March 1945 Soviet troops crossed the Austrian frontier from Hungary. At the beginning of May the British entered Carinthia from Italy and the Americans crossed the German frontier into the Tyrol. By the 13th of April the Russians were in control of Vienna, and before the end of the month large areas of Lower Austria and Styria had been freed. In the south and the west the British and the Americans met with very little resistance.

The speed of the liberation was due partly to the general situation. The morale of the Nazi armies was crumbling: on the 25th of April Berlin was surrounded and five days later Hitler committed suicide. But it was due also to the attitude of the Austrian people and to the work of the Austrian Resistance Movement. They made the Allied task easy and saved Austria from much damage.

Resistance groups had begun to form in Austria as early as 1938. During the Nazi occupation and the War the strength of the opposition was shown by the large number of soldiers and civilians executed for desertion and 'treasonable' activities. The exact number will never be known, but it was probably between 15,000 and 20,000. At the Kagran rifle-range in Vienna the shooting of deserters was on the daily programme, and the number of victims reached thirty to forty a week. A chaplain who ministered to military prisoners in Vienna counted over 1,000 executions in his own area between 1940 and 1943.

These figures indicate both the strength and hazards of the resistance in Austria.

To organize opposition in Austria was particularly dangerous

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appointed, and two radio sets were smuggled across the frontier for use at Innsbruck and Salzburg. It was also arranged that the B.B.C. and the Voice of America should broadcast for POEN and the Austrian Resistance Movement.

In March, Fritz Molden, a young Austrian who had played a leading part in establishing relations with the Allies, visited the Allied Air Headquarters at Caserta. He took with him an appeal from the Resistance Movement, asking the Allies not to bomb civil objectives in Austria and pointing out that restraint on this point would make the task of the movement in organizing opposition easier. The Americans gave Molden, as the representative of POEN, the status of a special liaison officer with their forces in Italy.

The last Nazi effort to mobilize forces for the defence of Austria was the calling out of the *Volkssturm* in the autumn of 1944. This *levée en masse* of those that remained was doomed to failure from the start. All able-bodied men of military age had already been conscripted, and the hurried mobilization of the young, the old, and the unfit could only have succeeded had they been filled with a spirit of devotion to the cause. But this was almost entirely lacking. Drill and training in most cases were not taken seriously, often as the result of tacit understanding between officers and men. An Associated Press report from Buchs on the Austro-Swiss frontier towards the end of March 1945 estimated that 60,000 Austrians had fled to the hills to avoid the new form of service. During the liberation campaign that followed, not only members of the *Volkssturm* but whole units of the *Wehrmacht* under Austrian officers broke up and went home, changing their uniforms for civilian clothes. In these circumstances, Hitler's Wagnerian plan for a last stand in his 'Alpine fortress' at Berchtesgaden was abandoned. He chose for the final scene Berlin, where the details were less likely to escape his control.

In the brief battle for Vienna the general attitude of the population had a decisive influence. A group of army officers, led by Major Biedermann, who had established contact with the Russians, were betrayed and executed soon after fighting

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began. But this tragedy did not change the mood of the people. They were impatient for liberation, and many were prepared to do all they could to hasten it. Shortly before the Russians arrived, a meeting of the Resistance was held to consider the final plans, and its decisions were put into action successfully. The SS were hampered in every way; deserters were helped, and service in the *Volkssturm* was refused. Thousands of civilian suits were provided for troops, who were then given refuge in cellars. Even the Gestapo put the number of deserters at more than 10,000, and other estimates were much higher. Members of the *Volkssturm*, who were described by an observer as looking old and apprehensive, often threw away their weapons, if they could do so with safety. One army officer issued rifles from his store to members of the Resistance, who in turn opened fire on the SS at the barricades.

The Nazi leaders had planned a fanatical defence of 'fortress Vienna'. But in one of his last broadcasts Goebbels described the city as a stain on the German escutcheon. On the 13th of April, the day when the battle ended, Moscow radio announced that the Viennese had saved the honour of Austria and gained immortal merit by the part they had played in the liberation.

Apart from the few days' campaign in Lower Austria that preceded the battle for Vienna, there was much less fighting in the Austrian provinces than there had been in the capital. In Styria and Carinthia members of the Resistance took up arms at the end of March, but events in those provinces had little effect on the fate of Austria. The city of Salzburg was spared the possibility of serious damage by the action of the senior army officer in the city, who penetrated the American lines and surrendered on his own authority. In the Tyrol there was also little actual fighting, but the Resistance Movement was more highly organized than in any other part of the country.

The independent spirit of the Tyrolese had led to the formation of Resistance groups at an early stage in the Nazi occupation. The mountainous character of their countryside and its long, secluded valleys made it a comparatively easy matter for the groups to maintain themselves on a purely local basis.

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By the spring of 1945 there were more than twenty of them in existence. When Dr. Karl Gruber, the present Foreign Minister, arrived in Innsbruck from Berlin at the end of the first week in April, a number of groups chose him as their common commander, and he set about co-ordinating their activities. Gruber established his headquarters successively in a sanatorium, a café, and the premises of a mineral-water business. As he had been working as an engineer in a Berlin radio firm during the War, it was comparatively easy for him to establish wireless communication with the French and American armies. Under his unified command the Tyrol Resistance gained in confidence and strength.

A series of smaller actions culminated in the capture of a German general's headquarters on the Hungerburg, just outside Innsbruck, and in the occupation on the 2nd of May of a barracks inside the city which contained a large supply of weapons and ammunition. For about twenty-four hours before the Americans arrived, on the 4th of May, the greater part of the Tyrol was in the hands of the Resistance. This had the result of reducing destruction to a minimum and saving the all-important bridges.

With the moral support of the great majority of Austrians and the active help of the Resistance, the military task of the Allies in Austria was soon accomplished. But it was by no means the only problem that confronted them as liberators. The very speed of the campaign and the thoroughness of the Nazi defeat brought with them special difficulties.

Many Nazi officials left Vienna in a hurry and a spirit of reckless, indignant despair. Part of the German artillery had had no ammunition since leaving Hungary, and in spite of the exhortations of Goebbels and Himmler, those in authority realized the hopelessness of the military situation. They therefore took what they could from their stores and, when possible, destroyed or damaged what was left. Thus the Germans set an example of looting and wanton destruction, which was continued by the Russians and the Austrians themselves.

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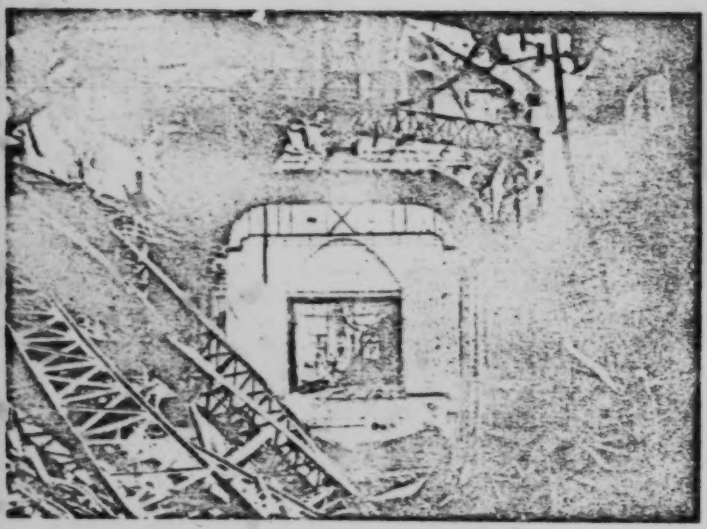
726 A continuous stream of refugees had been crowding into Vienna from Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and the Austrian countryside to the east. They not only increased the number of mouths to be fed, but added dangerously to the irresponsible element in the city.

The last act of the retreating Germans will never be forgotten, nor quite forgiven, by the Viennese. St. Stephen's Cathedral, with its high-pitched roof and magnificent steeple, has dominated the centre of Vienna for centuries. Historically and spiritually it is the heart of the city. The cathedral had survived the severe air-raids of February and March 1945 with only minor damage and the loss of glass. But between the 8th and the 13th of April it was almost entirely burnt out after a long and at first successful struggle to save it. A combination of circumstances was responsible for the catastrophe: a minor bombing attack on the 8th of April, a wooden scaffolding foolishly left round one of the towers, and a wind causing a rain of sparks from surrounding fires. But two deliberate orders given by the retreating Nazis probably decided the fate of St. Stephen's. The whole fire brigade was withdrawn from the city, and shortly afterwards, on the 11th of April, German artillery opened fire on the cathedral, hitting the tower and tearing open the roof.

727 The Russian troops entered Vienna as victors after a long and arduous campaign. They remembered what their own country had suffered at the hands of the German invaders, and many of them did not know the difference between one German-speaking person and another. An outburst of looting and excess was therefore hardly to be avoided, so long as battle conditions continued. But the disappointment came when fighting troops were replaced by the army of occupation, and the second wave of soldiery was found to be worse than the first. The primitive behaviour of the Russians was a poor advertisement for twenty-five years of Communism. The Viennese were genuinely grateful for their liberation and prepared to greet the Russians as friends. But women, who showed their gratitude openly, soon learned to stay at home, and for many



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The State Opera, Vienna, March 12th, 1945.

Nevertheless, Austria was annexed, and the prophetic words of another statesman, Prince Talleyrand, became bloodstained history: "To destroy Austria would be to replace order by chaos."

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These words of the Frenchman, spoken of the great Austrian Empire, proved true enough as a political axiom applied to the small Republic. As long as Europe exists the peace of the Continent will stand or fall with Austria's independence as a State, whether the latter throws the weight of her own strength into the scale, or can only appeal to a higher law and the conscience of the world as she has done during the last decades.

When Austria was wiped off the map the great nocturne of heartless killing and soulless dying began. Hecatombs of victims have brought home unforgettably to the world what may result when the right and the liberty of the weak are trampled into the dust. Whoever instigated violence in Austria has always plunged the whole of Europe—this time it proved to be the entire world—into destruction as well. The further development of man, according to a writer's pessimistic words—from

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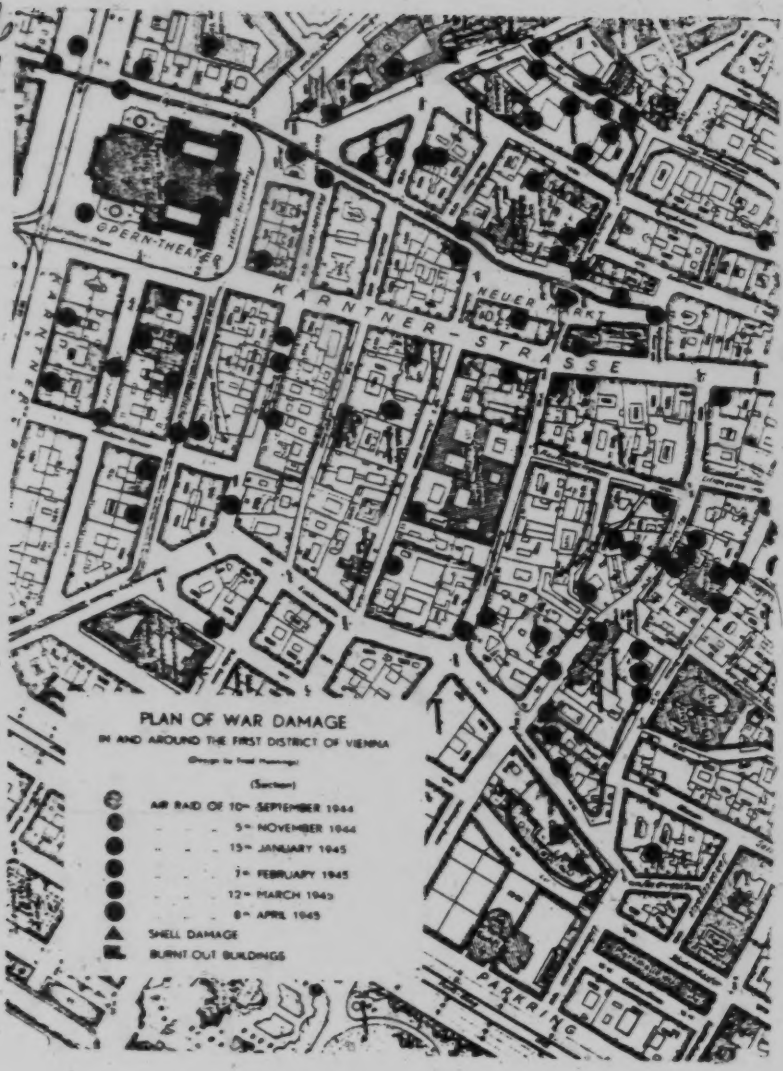
OPERN-THEATER
KÄRNTNER-STRASSE
NEUER MARKT
PARKRING
PLAN OF WAR DAMAGE
IN AND AROUND THE FIRST DISTRICT OF VIENNA
(Design by Fred Hennings)
(Section)
AIR RAID OF 10th SEPTEMBER 1944
5th NOVEMBER 1944
15th JANUARY 1945
7th FEBRUARY 1945
12th MARCH 1945
8th APRIL 1945
SHELL DAMAGE
BURNT OUT BUILDINGS

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726 humanity to bestiality through nationality—was in full progress. The proclamation of total war by the Nazi Propaganda Minister introduced the last stage of madness. There had to be annihilation one way or the other—if not of the enemy, then of his own people.

Vienna's bitterest days had dawned. Above the city which had been forcibly embodied in Hitler's armament machinery circled the bombers. Those who were our enemies in the front line and in their hearts our friends, were obliged to destroy in order to liberate. Cruel twentieth century!

As the seventh anniversary of Austria's annexation approached, Vienna was in flames from end to end. Transport was at a standstill. The streets were filled with dust, smoke, haze and people who were feverishly digging in the debris. Suddenly a rumour ran through the city which nobody would believe: "The Opera burns!"

People forgot their own fate and rushed on to the Ring. An endless procession of spectators a day and a night long and still another day and night. So long did it take for the building to burn down.

Vienna has two hearts. This first tragedy was followed a few weeks later by a senseless piece of brutality. The SS troops fleeing before the victorious Red Army started to fire on the venerable Cathedral of St. Stephen's with artillery posted in Leopoldau. A few hours later this landmark of the city was in flames, and with it the Kärntnerstrasse, the Rotenturmstrasse and the entire length of the Kai.

Destruction through denial of the Creator, the day of the great anti-Christ. Oh you men in uniform, what have you done to Vienna?—Slowly the night fades over Austria. The flames leaping from the high roof of the Cathedral silently ring in the dawn of freedom.